

William 'Bill' Lucy

MODULE 2: Memphis 1968 -- How 'I AM A MAN' Was Made

MODULE SNAPSHOT

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| Grade level | 8-12 (adaptable for 6-7) |
| Time | 45 min single class OR 90 min block |
| Subject fit | U.S. History, Civics, ELA, African American Studies, Labor Studies |
| Co-built with | CBTU Memphis (cbtu.org) |

01

Learning Objectives -- Students Will Be Able To:

1. Trace the chain of events from the Feb 1, 1968 deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker to the placard 'I AM A MAN.'
2. Identify William Lucy's role as AFSCME's national lead on the Memphis Sanitation Strike -- and explain why his presence mattered.
3. Distinguish between a wage demand and a dignity declaration in labor organizing.
4. Connect AFSCME Local 1733, T.O. Jones, the sanitation workers, and the national civil-rights coalition that converged on Memphis.
5. Apply the 'four-word principle' (declaration over demand) to a contemporary labor or community issue.

02

Teacher Background -- 60 Second Brief

On February 1, 1968, Memphis sanitation workers Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death inside a faulty garbage truck. They had taken shelter from the rain inside the truck's compactor -- Black workers were not allowed inside the truck cabs or municipal buildings during their shifts. Eleven days later, on Feb 12, 1968, 1,300 mostly Black sanitation workers walked out, demanding recognition of AFSCME Local 1733 (led by T.O. Jones, who had been quietly organizing since 1963), safer equipment, and a living wage. AFSCME's national leadership sent William Lucy -- their Secretary-Treasurer and a Memphis native -- to anchor the response. Lucy understood that the strike could not stay framed as a wage dispute. The dignity violation was older and deeper than any paycheck. He worked with sanitation workers, AFSCME organizers, and Memphis ministers to craft the four-word placard -- 'I AM A MAN' -- that became the moral hinge of the entire 65-day strike. Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph urged Dr. King to come to Memphis to stand with the strikers. King came. He died at the Lorraine Motel on April 4, 1968. The strike ended in victory two weeks later: AFSCME Local 1733 was recognized, wages rose, and dignity was on the record. The labor movement and the civil rights movement became one beam of light from two angles -- and William Lucy was the man who turned the prism.

03

Primary Source Excerpts

Memphis Sanitation Workers placard, February 1968

"I AM A MAN"

William Lucy on Memphis 1968 (Labor Education ebook, Chapter 2)

"I AM A MAN was not a request. It was a declaration. We were telling Memphis -- and America -- that our humanity was not negotiable."

T.O. Jones, AFSCME Local 1733, on the deaths of Cole and Walker

"Those men did not die in an accident. They died because the city of Memphis did not consider them men. That is what this strike is about."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Memphis, April 3, 1968 ('Mountaintop' speech)

"It's alright to talk about long white robes over yonder, in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here!"

AFSCME President Jerry Wurf, on Lucy's role

"Without Bill Lucy in Memphis, that strike does not turn into what it became. He held the rope -- between the union, the workers, the ministers, and the national movement."

04

Discussion Questions -- 5 Essential

1. Cole and Walker died because they were not allowed inside the truck cab or municipal buildings. How is that violation BOTH a labor issue and a civil rights issue at the same time?
2. What's the difference between a placard reading 'WE DEMAND BETTER WAGES' and one reading 'I AM A MAN'? Why did Lucy choose the second form?
3. The strike was led by T.O. Jones locally and supported by Lucy nationally. Why did it take BOTH levels to win? What would have been lost without either one?
4. Dr. King came to Memphis specifically because Rustin and Randolph urged him to. What does that tell us about how labor and civil rights leadership flowed across the same network?
5. Today's organizing campaigns sometimes use dignity language ('Essential workers,' 'Black Lives Matter,' 'I AM ESSENTIAL'). Trace one of them back to the Memphis 1968 placard. What did Memphis teach modern movements?

05

Activity -- 'Design Your Own Placard' (25 minutes)

Each student designs a single-line placard for a real or imagined movement they care about. The placard MUST be a declaration of dignity (like 'I AM A MAN'), not a demand or a complaint. Constraint: 6 words or fewer. After 10 minutes, each student stands and reads their placard aloud, then explains in 30 seconds: why this declaration, and not a demand? The class then votes on the three most powerful placards. Discuss: what made them work? What's the difference between asking for respect and DECLARING your humanity? Optional extension: in groups, draft a brief statement explaining how the chosen placard refers back to Lucy's craft in Memphis 1968.

06

Assessment -- Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

1. Name Echol Cole, Robert Walker, T.O. Jones, William Lucy. In one sentence each: who were they and what did they do?
2. Why is 'I AM A MAN' stronger than 'We demand a raise'? Answer in one sentence.
3. Write a 6-word dignity declaration for something you care about right now.

07

Extensions & Going Deeper

- > Watch 'At the River I Stand' (1993, 56 min) -- the definitive Memphis 1968 doc. Free on Kanopy with a library card. It's in your Labor Education library at laboreducation.org/adult-library.
- > Visit the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis (in person or virtual tour).
- > Read AFSCME Local 1733's strike materials and demand lists -- compare them to the placard language.
- > Research a current sanitation, warehouse, or essential-worker organizing fight. What dignity-violation pattern do you see?
- > Visit laboreducation.org/bayard-rustin for the companion module on Rustin's role connecting King to Memphis.

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This module honors the elders who paid the way. CBTU national: cbtu.org. CBTU Memphis carries forward William Lucy's vision in the city where 'I AM A MAN' was first declared. Companion curricula: laboreducation.org/a-philip-randolph (Randolph + APRI) and laboreducation.org/bayard-rustin (Rustin + Memphis 1968).

